

Etymological and Technical Definitions of Musical Terms*

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In Sanskrit, almost every word can be assigned a sense by deriving it from a root (supported by the enumeration in the *Dhatupatha* of Panini), or bestowed a significance by breaking it up into its 'parts'. This practice is common in dealing with technical terms in various disciplines, which are understood in their application. And within one science, a technical term comes to have a range of connotations in different contexts and over different periods. This paper takes up some important technical terms in the discipline of music, and examines the burden of sense they have acquired over the years. The terms we take up for study are *śruti*, *nada*, *svara* and *rāga*.

Śruti

In the *lakṣaṇagranthas* (technical treatises), the authors often quote the *Dhatupatha* for the sense of a term and elaborate it in the context of music. Sometimes the word is reduced to its letters, and the significance they have — the associated meanings — is relied upon to add substance to it. However, in ancient works like the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and *Dattilam*, we do not come across *nirukta* of the reductive-analysis type. In these works the technical terms are not explicitly defined, but yield their sense in the context. Quite often, in these works, the appropriateness or the reason for using a term is pointed out, and this has to serve as a definition.

... उत्तरोत्तरस्तु वीणायामधरोत्तरः

इति ध्वनि (वि)शेषास्ते श्रवणाच्छ्रुतिसंज्ञिताः । [Datt, 8-9]

Here, the term *śruti* has been used to denote the fine pitch differences between sounds graded in a range — since they are discerned through hearing, they are appropriately termed *śruti*. Another authority, Viśvaṇaṣu, is cited in the *Bṛhaddeśī*, giving a similar explanation:

श्रवणेन्द्रियग्राह्यत्वाद् ध्वनिरेव श्रुतिर्भवति । [BṛD, 10]

The *Bṛhaddeśī* itself first cites the grammatical formation of the word in the sense of 'heard sound':

श्रु श्रवणे चास्य घातोः क्ति(न्)प्रत्ययसमुद्भवः ।

श्रुतिशब्दः प्रसाध्यो यं शब्दज्ञैः कर्मसाधनरूः ॥ [BṛD, 24]

'The word *śruti* is derived from the root *śru* employed in the sense of 'to hear'; when the affix 'kṭin' is applied to it, it indicates the object of hearing.'

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The term śruti is used in the early Gandharva system of music in the sense of a tonal unit of measurement. It denotes a small interval of sound that is used for measuring larger intervals like those of svaras (NS. Vol. IV, p. 20.1.2.). It also denotes the sounds that are separated by such an interval.

The word also has some extended usages. For instance,

ततावनद्वंशानामेकश्रुतिक तो पि च । [NS 34,145ab]

The word here is 'ekasruti', and it is used in the sense of 'sounding in unison', co-ordinated sound.

In the Śikṣa texts such as *Naradiyaśikṣa*, the term is used to denote the subtle distinctions in svara or intonation:

यथाप्सु चरतां मार्गो मीनानां नोपलभ्यते ।
आकाशे वा विहङ्गानां तद्वत् स्वरगता श्रुतिः ॥
यथा दधि सर्पिः स्यात् काष्ठस्थो वा यथानलः ।
प्रयत्नेनोपलभ्यते तद्वत् स्वरगता श्रुतिः ॥ [NSik, 1,6,16-17]

'Like the paths of fish swimming in the water or of birds flying in the sky, śruti eludes identification, and can be reached only by effort, like the fire latent in wood or the curd in milk'. The *Naradiyaśikṣa* mentions five ways of intoning svara, and these are *diptā*, *ayata*, *karuṇa*, *mṛdu*, and *madhyā*.

In present-day musical parlance the word śruti is used to denote the basic tonic note or the fundamental pitch on which *śadja*, the first svara, of the middle octave or register, is placed by a performer. In determining his middle octave in this manner, the singer or instrument-player is guided by the need to be able to move with ease down into the lower octave upto five svaras, and up into the upper octave to the same extent. The fixed tonic is also referred to as *adharaśruti*. Strangely enough, in the North Indian system, the word used for this is *svara* or *sura*. The instrument which is used for sounding the fundamental śruti is called śruti-box in the South, and svara-peṭi in the North.

Occasionally, in South Indian practice, in rendering songs based on certain rāgas, the tonic or śruti is raised from śadja to madhyama in the *madhyasthayā*. This is called *madhyamaśruti*.

Thus we find that the term śruti is used in different but related senses in the context of music. The primary sense of the word is 'being heard'. This is the sense in which the word is used in alluding to the Vedas, which were 'heard' by the sages and were not written by mortals. This sense of divine wisdom is extended to learning and deep knowledge of all matters, which are also alluded to as śruti.

Nada

Now we take up the term 'nada', which we find in later works like *Bṛhaddeśi* describing another Gandharva tradition. This term is conspicuous by its absence in earlier works like the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and *Dattilam*. The *Naradiyaśikṣa* and *Sarasvatihṛdayalankarahara* of

Nanyadeva also do not mention the term. The *Brhaddeśi* presents a nirukta of this term, analysing it into two monosyllabic words (which indicate the manner of its production), and deriving it from a root as well:

नकारः प्राण इत्याहुर्दकारश्चानलो मतः ।

नादस्य द्विपदार्थो यं समीचीनो मयोदितः ।

नादो यं नदतेर्धातोः

[BrD, 20-21; 8]

Nada therefore stands for expressive sound. In music it denotes sound which is articulated in the form of tone, i.e., the sound specific to music. It is described as emanating from the desire to create music, and is the stage before tonal articulation. Nada is identified with the conception as well as the expression of musical sound (BrD, 21; SR, 1, 3, 3).

In our own times, the word 'nada' is used to indicate tonal quality. For instance, we speak of a Vīṇa or Mṛdaṅgam as having good *nadam* or bad *nadam*.

Svara

The next term is 'svara'. The *vyutpatti* given in the *Brhaddeśi* is as follows:

राज दीप्ताविति धातोः स्वशब्दपूर्वकस्य च ।

[BrD, 54ab]

"The word 'svara' is derived from the root '*rajr*' used in the sense of 'to shine', with the prefix 'sva'." This root does not convey the sense of sound at all.

In Veda recitation, svara stands for accents, and the accents given to syllables in such recitation were almost musical. In the discipline of *vyākaraṇa*, svara stands for vowel, as distinct from consonant. As the accents in recitation fall on the vowels, probably the term svara was applied to the accents as well. And as the accents in sacred recitation almost reach the state of musical tone, the latter probably came to be denoted by the term svara.

In fact, in *vyākaraṇa*, Patañjali defines svara as follows:

स्वयं राजन्त इति स्वराः ।

[MB on AA, 1, 2, 29-30]

'As they shine (sound) of their own accord, they are svaras.' While vowels can be uttered on their own, consonants cannot be uttered without the help of vowels.

This same definition is echoed in the context of music in the *Brhaddeśi*:

स्वयं यो राजते यस्मात् तस्मादेष स्वरः स्मृतः ।

[BrD, 54 cd]

Extending this definition to music does not seem very appropriate; there is nothing significant about it. In grammar, svaras being contrasted with *vyañjanas*, the definition of the svara as shining independently, is significant. There is no such contrast in music to justify this definition. (The justification can be put forward that svara or tone is charming or

significant on its own, without having any referential sense.) This is probably why Abhinava takes this definition as an etymological interpretation. The first part of the word, *sva*, stands for '*svayam*', and '*ra*' stands for '*rajate*'. He then quotes a slightly elaborate version of the same definition from some other scholar:

वर्णसाम्यादपि निरुक्तिमाहुः । स्वयं स्वेव जातिरागभाषाभेदेषु राजन्त, इति स्वराः ।

[AB on NS,28,21.Vol.IV, p.11,II.2-3.]

Here *svaras*, through *nirukta*, are explained as those that shine or charm only within the context of the *jati*, *raga* or *bhāṣa* to which they belong. This shows that *svara* is part of tonal articulation, just as word is of speech. Sounding a single tone cannot give rise to joy. It is within the context of a melody that a *svara* delights. Earlier, commenting on the enumeration of *svaras* (*śadja*, etc.) by Bharata, Abhinava explains the word *svara* as sound, particularly musical sound or tone-complex, which transports the listener's mind with delight.

It is interesting to see how Abhinavagupta derives the word *svara*, keeping in mind its connotation of 'sound', as well as its capacity to delight.

[स्व शब्दोपतापयोः स्वर आक्षेप इत्यनयोः स्वरशब्दः । तेन शब्दस्वभावां चित्तव तिमध्यस्थता-
रूपस्वास्थावस्थापरित्याजनेन उपतापयन्तो हृद्यतातिशयवशात्
स्वतामाक्षिपन्तः स्वविषये अभिधानं कुर्वतः स्वरा इत्युक्ताः ।

[AB on NS,28,21 (vol.IV,p.10)]

There are two dhatus, '*svr*' (DP,1,666) and '*svara*' (DP,10,288). The first is used in two senses, namely, *śabda*, meaning 'sound', and *upatapa*, meaning 'heating' or 'melting'. The other root, '*svara*', is used in the sense of *akṣēpa*, meaning 'seizing/captivating'. *Svaras* make the mind shed its neutral, independent state, melting it with their great beauty, and impose their own tonal nature on it. And with reference to themselves, the *svaras* (*śadja* and others) name their tonal identities. It is the root *svr* that has some relation to sound. However, Abhinava uses all the above roots and their range of sense to design a definition suitable to the concept of *svara* in music. This interpretation of *svara* covers the aesthetic process that takes place in the mind listening to music. The word '*akṣēpa*' aptly describes the experience of becoming spellbound in the presence of any great work of art.

Some scholars like Kohala had formulated definitions that treated *svara* in the process of its expression. The self, desirous of expression (in musical sound), gives rise to *svara*:

आत्मेच्छया महीतलाद् वायुरुच्चनिधायति ।

नाडीभित्तौ तथा काशे ध्वनी रक्तः स्वरः स्मृतः ।

[Kohala quoted in BrD, I, p. 28.]

Again,

ऊर्ध्वनाडीप्रयत्नेन सर्वभित्तिनिघट्टनात् ।

मूर्च्छितो ध्वनिमूर्च्छः स्वरो सौ व्यापकः परः ।

[Kohala quoted in BrD, I, p. 30.]

We cite Prem Lata Sharma's translation from the *Brhaddeśi*:

By the will of the atman, the vayu [vital air] (that is) moving upward from the base of the

'earth' [nabhi, navel] (and) is held on the 'wall' of the nadis and in the space, is known as svara, the delightful sound.

By the effort of the urdhvanaḍis on account of rubbing or striking of all 'walls', the sound that grows up to the cerebrum is svara, it is vyapaka [pervasive] (and) para [beyond].

This definition of svara given by Kohala is not very dissimilar to the definitions of nada and śruti found in available treatises. Perhaps Kohala did not use the word nada, so his notion of svara being similar to the notion of nada, which we have come across in other works, is understandable. Again, svara has to be distinguished from śruti, though both essentially relate to sound. Kohala's qualifying 'dhvani' with 'rakta' in his definition of svara is a pointer towards that.

Abhinava formulates a very firm and clear definition of svara from this angle too:

वयं तु श्रुतिस्थानाभिघातप्रभवशब्दप्रभावितो नुरणनात्मा स्निग्धमधुरः शब्द एव स्वर
इति वक्ष्यामः । [AB on NS,28,21. vol. IV, p. 71, II.9-10]

'When the position of a śruti is struck, only the sound that gains resonance, mellifluousness and sweetness can be called svara.' This notion of svara identifies it as a distinguishable fragment of melody. (This is similar to distinguishing a word as a unit of linguistic expression.) This connotation is the one popularly associated with the word svara today.

But in ancient treatises svara stood not merely for a unit of melody, but for the entire aspect of melody in music. This is clear from the definition of Gandharva presented by Bharata:

गान्धर्वं त्रिविधं विद्यात् स्वरतालपदात्मकम् । [NS,28,11ab]

'Music is said to be constituted by svara, *tala* and *pada*.' Svara refers to the melodic aspect, *tala* to the regulation of the temporal rhythm, and *pada* to the verbal text.

One development that took place in the tradition — not recorded by Bharata but described by Maṭaṅga — is the singing of the syllables *sa*, *ri*, *ga*, *ma*, *pa*, *dha* and *ni* at the pitch positions associated with *ṣaḍja*, *ṛṣabha*, etc. The singing of these syllables came to be referred to as svara. In the *prabandha* forms this singing of svara syllables seems to have constituted the section called svara, as mentioned in the *Saṅgītaratnākara* of Śaṅgadeva:

स्वराः षड्जादयस्तेषां वाचकाः सरिगादयः ।
स्वराभिव्यक्तिसंयुक्ताः स्वरशब्देन कीर्तिताः ॥ [SR,4,15cd-16ab]

The particular sense of the term svara lingers in the terms *muktāyīsvaram*, *cittaśvaram*, *kalpanāśvaram*, etc., which are employed in South Indian music.

Raga

We now come to the term 'raga'. This term is elaborately dealt with in the *Bṛhaddeśī*. The passage devoted to describing this concept is in the form of a dialogue in which Maṭaṅga

answers the question:

किमुच्यते रागशब्देन किं वा रागस्य लक्षणम् ।
व्युत्पत्तिलक्षणं तस्य यथावद् वक्तुमर्हति ॥

मतङ्ग उवाच . . .

तत्रादौ —

स्वरवर्णविशेषेण ध्वनिभेदेन वा पुनः ।
रज्यते येन सच्चित्तं स रागः सम्मतः सताम् ॥

अथवा —

यो सौ ध्वनिविशेषस्तु स्वरवर्णविभूषितः ।
रजको जनचित्तानां स च राग उदाहृतः ॥
सामान्यं च विशेषं च लक्षणं द्विविधं मतम् ।
चतुर्विधं तु सामान्यं विशेषं चांशकादिकम् ॥
रजनाज्जायते रागो व्युत्पत्तिः समुदाहृता ।
इत्येवं रागशब्दस्य व्युत्पत्तिरभिधीयते ॥
अश्वकर्णादिवद्रूढो यौगिको मण्डपादिवत् ।
योगरूढो धवा रागो ज्ञेयः पङ्कजशब्दवत् ॥

[BrD, v.261, vv.263-267 (vol.2, pp.76-77)]

The first definition is — ‘as it suffuses or delights the good (discerning) mind with varied combinations of tones in melodic movements, and its distinct individually in sound (tonal structure?), it is accepted as raga by connoisseurs’.

The second — ‘that distinct, individual sound complex, embellished by tone progressions, which delights the minds of the public, is called raga’.

Both these definitions cover the same ground. Both dwell on the delightfulness of raga in the etymological part, and the technical part names the three elements which are essential for melodic music, particularly for the developed form of this music which raga represents. While the terms *svara* and *varṇa*, and the concepts embodied, namely, the unit of melody and the ascending and descending directions perceived in melody, are applicable to melody in general, the term ‘*dhvanivīṣeṣa*’ seems to refer to the individual physiognomy which marks a raga, and distinguishes it from another.

The text of *Brhaddesī* itself begins with a description of the varied nature of *dhvani* in justification of the term *desī* applied to music:

नानाविधेषु देशेषु जन्तूनां सुखदो भवेत् ।
ततः प्रभ ति लोकानां नरेन्द्राणां यद च्छया ॥
देशे देशे प्रव त्तो सौ ध्वनिर्देशीति संज्ञितः ।

[BrD, 1-2ab]

‘In different lands, the *dhvani* (literally, sound) that pleases the inhabitants, from humble

living creatures to kings, is referred to as *deśi*. Here the word 'dhvani' seems to stand for melodies or music in general. Music varies from land to land, but is a source of delight to the people of the region where it has evolved.

When we come to the definition of raga, 'dhvani' is seen to be referring to melody, and, qualified by 'viśeṣa', it is obviously referring to the distinct individual character of a raga. While the general melodic features are presented in the *sāmānyalakṣaṇas* (such as melodic movement?), the individual identity of a raga is presented in the *viśeṣalakṣaṇas* such as *aṁśa* (fundamental and prominent *svara* in a tonal organization).

Mataṅga explains the three manners in which the word raga can be interpreted, to yield the *radha*, *yaugika*, and *yogaratna* senses. Conventionally, one knows that the term is applied to a melody/melody-source; its purpose is to tinge/delight the mind; and both conceptions are valid together only for tone complexes in music. So the term raga makes sense conventionally, etymologically, and applies in both ways only in the context of music.

This conception of raga has perhaps evolved and reached its present state of understanding very gradually. Today a raga cannot be defined as a mere scale (having no attributes other than the *svaras* that occur in the melody), or just a tune. The features that are identified as being common to, and recognizable in, the different melodic structures which are based on it would be the raga, and these features can only be described. So the definition of raga can only be a descriptive one, in terms of the *lakṣaṇas* which musical thought has arrived at. Both the individual recognizable identity of a raga and its serving as a source for tunes, or as the basis for elaborate melodic construction, are essential parts of the concept of raga.

In relatively recent times, i.e., in the past four centuries, the term raga has also come to be used in a different but related sense. 'Raga' is now commonly used to denote the musical form *alapana* or *raga-alapana*. A very important musical genre in South Indian music is referred to as *ragam-tanam-pallavi*, where *ragam* stands for the *alapana* or elaboration without perceptible temporal rhythm.

To sum up, etymological definitions seem to have been resorted to to supplement the technical definition of these terms with the description of the aesthetic impact of the aspects of music named by the terms in question. As we saw, Bharata and Dattila have not tried to bring the application of a term into a conscious definition. Abhinava has tried to make the terms *svara*, *śruti*, etc., more adequate by exploring all the verb roots giving rise to the word 'svara', and by examining the aesthetic difference between *svara* and *śruti*. Mataṅga has based his definitions on the accepted *yogika* theory of the production of expressive sound by man, and has considered the impact of music on the mind. The descriptive definition of raga put forth by Mataṅga, similar to the description of *jati* in terms of its *lakṣaṇas* by Bharata and by himself, is the precursor to the modern conception of raga. We have also seen the extension of the sense of all the terms — *svara*, *śruti*, *nada* and *raga* — over the ages, corresponding to developments in the practice of music. Without consciously defining them, musicians and theorists are employing these terms in discussing music, as their purport is grasped in practice.

ABBREVIATIONS

NS *Nāṭyaśāstra*
NSik *Naradīyaśikṣā*
AB *Abhinavabhāratī*

Datt *Dattilam*
BṛD *Bṛhaddeśī*
SR *Saṅgītaratnākara*

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